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## Standardized Tests Face A Crisis Over Standards

**BYLINE:** By Michael Winierip.

E-mail: edmike@nytimes.com

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NEVER has the nation's education system been so reliant on standardized tests and the companies that make them. Thanks to the federal No Child Left Behind Law, this year, for the first time, every student from third to eighth grade and one high school grade must take state tests. That is about 45 million tests to be graded annually and it does not even include all the standardized tests now required for professional certification, or the SAT, ACT, AP, GRE exams, to name a few.

Last week was not a good one for the half-dozen companies that dominate the testing industry. Pearson admitted that it had incorrectly scored thousands of the College Board's SAT tests. The Educational Testing Service agreed to pay \$11.1 million to settle a class-action suit brought on behalf of 4,100 people who were told that they had failed a teacher licensing test when they had actually passed. And in New York, new seventh- and eighth-grade tests developed by McGraw-Hill included several questions from practice tests that were mistakenly used again on the real tests.

Test officials say that it was just a bad week and that mistakes are few, considering all the tests given.

But in a recent study that is looking more prescient every minute, Thomas Toch, co-director of a new research group, EducationSector, describes how overextended and underregulated the testing industry is; he warns of many more bad weeks to come, unless something is done.

"The scale of N.C.L.B. testing requirements, competitive pressures in the testing industry, a shortage of testing experts, insufficient state resources, tight regulatory deadlines and a lack of meaningful oversight of the sprawling N.C.L.B. testing enterprise are undermining N.C.L.B.'s pursuit of higher academic standards," he writes. And that is from a man who supports the federal law.

While testing errors make headlines, Mr. Toch writes that even more worrisome is the pressure on states to dumb down their tests -- to switch from challenging tests with essay questions to multiple choice to save money and meet federal reporting deadlines. He points out how much cheaper and faster machine-scored multiple-choice tests are to grade. Florida can do a million multiple-choice tests in a day, while correcting tests with essay questions can take weeks. It costs a test company 50 cents to \$5 to score an essay, compared with pennies for each multiple-choice question.

The result? "Many of the tests that states are introducing under N.C.L.B. contain many questions that require students to merely recall and restate facts, rather than do more demanding tasks like applying or evaluating information," Mr. Toch writes in his study, which can be found at [www.educationsector.org](http://www.educationsector.org).

A recent Education Week survey found that 42 percent of students are now taking state reading and math tests that are entirely multiple choice. To save time and money, Kansas and Mississippi switched to all-multiple-choice tests this year.

Which brings us to Connecticut. Last year, Connecticut filed suit against the federal Department of Education, contending that federal officials had failed to pay the cost of all the tests required by No Child Left Behind. While the suit got much news media play, many of the underlying testing issues were missed.

Connecticut wants to maintain its state tests, which feature many essay questions and problems that require students to explain their

work. The state maintains that to administer these tests every year from third to eighth grade, as the federal law requires, will cost \$8 million more than federal financing provides.

In a May 3, 2005, letter, the federal education secretary, Margaret Spellings, said that while Connecticut's tests "are instructionally sound, they go beyond what was contemplated by N.C.L.B." Federal officials suggested that Connecticut switch to multiple-choice tests and eliminate writing tests to cut costs.

For many, the Connecticut lawsuit is a pivotal moment. Will the law's testing demands raise national education standards or lower them?

Connecticut has long been considered the gold standard of state testing programs, mixing multiple choice and essays. A fifth-grade reading test describes a popular game in Uganda and asks students to write an essay comparing the African game with a game played at their school. Connecticut's high school science test requires students to design and carry out a lab experiment, record the results and answer questions about it.

"Connecticut's reputation is to produce tests that are the best in the country," says James Popham, a national testing expert who is a professor emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles. "The Feds' position is so shortsighted. N.C.L.B. is supposed to be increasing the caliber of education and this is lowering it. It's eroding the power of the test to explain what kids can and cannot do."

In their legal papers, Connecticut officials said the deputy secretary of education, Ray Simon, suggested that the state, in addition to saving money by switching to multiple-choice reading and math tests in several grades and dropping its writing assessments, could also "use multiple choice for the N.C.L.B. science tests in grades 5, 8 and 10."

Betty Sternberg, Connecticut's education commissioner, said having challenging tests pushed schools to teach higher-level skills. "Writing is an essential skill that every youngster needs to succeed," she said. "Eliminating it is not an option."

TO hold down testing costs, Connecticut sought permission to give its state tests to every other grade, as it has done since the 1980's.

Ms. Spellings rejected this request, saying that annual testing was a crucial part of the law. Chad Colby, a spokesman for the federal Education Department, said officials would not comment on the pending lawsuit. But in an opinion article in The Hartford Courant last year, Ms. Spellings compared Connecticut officials to children who did not like tests and said that, as adults, they should "surely know better." She wrote that tests needed to be administered annually to highlight and shrink the achievement gap between white and black students.

In response, Gov. M. Jodi Rell wrote that testing twice as often would not close the gap and that the money would be better spent on preschool, technology and a longer school day.

Unlike Connecticut, Mississippi gave in and switched to multiple-choice tests. "Our budget has been very tight the last several years," said Kris Kaase, an associate state superintendent. Asked if he worried that the state was dumbing down its tests, he said, "It's a concern people have."

"It means a statewide assessment is not as complete an assessment of a student as we would like," he said.

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